

SEAM in Higher Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

The School of Business and Technology at The College of St. Scholastica in Minnesota implemented SEAM for organization development in the Fall of 2015. The purpose was to consolidate a fragmented faculty and work culture, provide a foundation for formulating an integrated strategy, and prioritize issues to help focus efforts toward resolution. This paper describes the experiences of faculty and the outcomes of the SEAM intervention for the School. Using the standard SEAM consulting process the School showed initial caution, but engaged SEAM tasks for improvements in all identified areas.

Key words: socio-economic, SEAM, higher education, transition, change

History of OD in higher education

Organization development (OD) has been applied to many organization types, including higher education, since its inception by Lewin and others circa 1946. Its early development focused on teaching improvement and faculty development, and was reflected in such widespread publications as the New Directions in Higher Education series by Marvin Freedman in 1973, and associations such as the Professional Organization Development (POD) Network in Higher Education in 1976. Yet for all this effort, organization development in higher education is often characterized as uncertain in its effectiveness and pace of change.

While OD has been shown to be effective in larger systems, it is unclear whether such efforts can be effectively implemented in smaller institutions (Griffin, 2006). The lack of similarities between industry and higher education and lack of specific change models for higher education also complicate the question of what works there (Torraco, Hoover, & Knippelmeyer, 2005).

The landscape of higher education is also changing rapidly due to market demands. Diversity of student and faculty populations, changes and advances in technology, reorientation from a social institution to more of a business structure (e.g., relating to students as “customers”), and strategic partnerships with communities and financial supporters, make OD more of a wicked problem (Mili, 2015).

Wicked problems are complex problems that do not lend themselves to simple or routine solutions using standard problem solving steps. These problems tend to be social in context, have multiple stakeholders with multiple and diverse definitions of the problem, involve ambiguity about the nature of the problem and its outcome, make demands for cost containment while expanding marketing, involve multiple change initiatives, and are often ongoing (Yawson, 2015). There are seldom simple or complete solutions for wicked problems, but the Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM) offers ways to work with them more effectively.

Resistance to change in higher education

Change in higher education institutions tends to be slower than in industry and business (Borwick, 2016). Maintaining excellence tends to support the status quo through tenured faculty who both provide teaching as well as have a voice in governance (Armstrong, 2014). Furthermore, academics may stay with the current organizational dynamics because “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know.” Resistance is exacerbated by the uncertainty and potential cost of the unknown future, protection of turf, and competition for scarce resources. SEAM offers information about the hidden costs of the status quo that can serve to unfreeze resistance and lead to a candid discussion about the inefficiencies, costs, and dissatisfaction that can drive change.

SEAM is unique in approaching change by uncovering the “hidden costs” of the status quo and exploring and identifying what might be recovered by reducing the dysfunctions that produce the delays, inefficiencies, and other suboptimization of performance and morale. Since these hidden costs are not on a finance sheet, they are often overlooked by management and continue to negatively affect performance. In the early stage of intervention, SEAM’s emphasis on identifying these costs tends to shock participants into awareness of the limitations of remaining with the status quo, as well as helps identify directions for change.

SEAM in the School of Business & Technology

The roles of the authors in this SEAM intervention included serving as participants, leadership, and professionals with experience in organization development. The authors actively engaged in discussion of whether to proceed with the SEAM intervention and participated in meetings throughout all stages of the SEAM process. Both authors have professional experience in organization development: the first author (Lynn Kalnbach) is an industrial/organizational psychologist who teaches organization development and had consulted with organizations for over a decade; the second author (David Swenson) was traditionally trained in the National Training Laboratory OD approach, later adding systems and solution-focused approaches in his 45 years of OD consulting. Both authors were interested in SEAM beyond academic curiosity due to feelings of frustration and discouragement as active members of the School.

The School of Business and Technology at the College of St. Scholastica had been dealing with transition issues for several years: Reduced resources (e.g., “do more with less”), changing or unclear strategic direction, changes in academic deans and department chairs, changing priorities and expectations, new and phased-out programs, curricular revisions, and interpersonal conflicts. Previous efforts at organization development or even small-scale change had been marginally successful, but often decisions had been diffused or not enforced. While faculty and staff sporadically made efforts to deal with these issues, the initiatives tended to lack focus or follow through. It was not uncommon for faculty and staff to spend time complaining about workload and wasted time. At the same time, faculty morale was decreasing and conflicts stemming from unclear priorities and competition for resources were becoming more frequent.

Our new Dean and Management Department Chair each had experience in OD and recently had become involved in SEAM. Their discussions with faculty piqued interest in a new approach to thinking about change and our concerns, leading to an initial meeting among School leadership to see whether SEAM was consistent with and could further our strategic plan. With congruence confirmed, the 16 full-time faculty were approached to see whether there was sufficient interest in exploring SEAM as an OD and faculty development opportunity.

Our Introduction to SEAM

Over the years, faculty in the School of Business and Technology had experienced many different approaches to faculty and organization development. Some had been brief exercises and activities as part of retreats or ad hoc workshops, while others had been sincere efforts toward strategic planning and culture change-- all with limited results and a feeling of discouragement toward planned change. The current challenges were several: We needed to build a cohesive faculty and staff to develop strategic plans, increase overall professionalism and civility of some relationships, clarify how decisions would be made on various types of issues, and solidify our marketing brand for current and new programs at undergraduate and graduate levels. When SEAM was first introduced, initial reactions ranged from, “what, one more exercise?” and “we’re desperate and willing to try anything,” to “let’s try it, what can we lose?”

The Dean and Management Department Chair were each relatively new to their positions and enjoyed high credibility with faculty and staff in the school. Both had OD experience and had worked with the SEAM consultants in the past. The first task was to form a leadership team and consider whether a SEAM intervention would fit the current strategy. A second task involved asking faculty whether they would be willing to again consider planned change. A cautious “yes” led to a kickoff meeting in early November of 2015 where the SEAM process was described. All full-time, part-time, and adjunct faculty on main and off- campus sites were invited to participate either in a group meeting, focus group, or individual update on SEAM.

From the beginning SEAM had a different flavor than other OD approaches. Unfreezing, in Kurt Lewin's terms, is the shaking up of the status quo so to direct people toward new goals and the transition process. SEAM framed the problem slightly differently-- "What are the hidden costs of what you are currently doing?" In addition, "dysfunctions" in the organization were identified. However, dysfunctions were defined somewhat differently than traditional meanings; in SEAM, dysfunctions represent areas in which the organization is not functioning properly, thereby contributing to the hidden costs. Many client systems resist change because they fear the costs and risks of the unknown. The task of identifying hidden costs of current practices was intriguing and had not been a perspective we had explored before. Hidden costs allowed our school members to identify the opportunity cost or lost value of frustrations and inefficiencies in our daily practices, while at the same time, if reduced, had implications for how we could have more time for creativity and other pursuits. Following the kickoff meeting, the leadership group logged tasks and used the time tracking worksheet. The tracking involved the time assessment in which we logged each task, who "owned" the task, the type of activity (routine or dysfunction), its relative value, urgency, observations and comments, and finally the extent to which it should be kept or changed.

The time tracking assessment is much like a "time-motion" study in industry where nearly every activity and task are timed, recorded, and used to determine value and productivity level, but in this case it was also used to reflect the time wasters, inefficiencies, and frustrations. The purpose of the tool was to help each individual to begin to see the extent to which their time was wasted by dysfunctions.

Interviews with faculty and staff were conducted to gather in-depth information; quotes were recorded anonymously for later group feedback. A variety of dysfunctions were identified, ranging from minor issues such as "the coffee room often runs out of coffee," to major issues such as "IT support is not available when we need it," and "we don't have time for creative projects." After the dysfunctions were identified, the hidden cost of each dysfunction was calculated. For instance, the amount of time was collated and translated into hourly salary costs, with the results being the "hidden costs" of such dysfunctions. SEAM research across organizations has shown that hidden costs for individuals can range from \$20,000 to \$80,000 per person per year (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011).

In early December a "Mirror Effect" meeting with all full time faculty and staff was held over an evening dinner. The consultants read back the anonymous quotes that had been elicited regarding the hidden costs. The effect of the reflection is to unfreeze or shock people and move them toward agreement to take action in organizational change. The tactic had the desired effect: the large amount of information, long list of dysfunctions, and all of it expressed in our personal quotes was initially experienced as shocking and somewhat overwhelming-- the cost to maintaining the status quo was too much. This feedback also served to help define the scope and

focus of change while shifting the responsibility of correcting the hidden costs throughout the levels of the organization and changing roles of all stakeholders to those of participants in change (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2013).

The summary of the financial costs of dysfunction was startling to all participants. While individuals were surprised with the results of hidden costs for themselves, the combined hidden costs of the school were alarming. For example, inefficient equipment such as loss of online connectivity during teaching was estimated to adversely affect productivity with a hidden cost of \$12,058. Extra time of delaying work, changing offices, or working from home instead of office due to distracting extraneous noise was estimated at \$36,778. Other examples of hidden costs can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Cost of Dysfunctions. Representative Areas and Total Costs.

Dysfunction	Extra time on Tasks	Missed Productivity
Inefficient equipment & loss of online connectivity		\$12,058
Distracting hallway noise outside of offices	\$36,778	
Employee conflicts, gossiping, complaining	\$64,310	
Unclear policies & procedures requiring extra time to clarify	\$24,116	
Poorly organized and led meetings waste of time	\$10,099	
Time on irrelevant emails for managers	\$64,310	
College tour leaders unaware of SB&T program & loss of enrollees		\$9,702 per student
Perceived low quality leading to drop in student retention		\$14,850 per student
Students admitted to grad program with insufficient skills requiring extra faculty grading effort		\$125,405
Extra time for advising due to computer systems not linking properly	\$3,350	

Examples of dysfunctional cost areas (not all areas are included here)

Total Dysfunction Cost	Extra time	Overconsumption	Missed production
Plus, not enrolling or losing students– at least \$200,000/year	\$500,498	\$13,650	\$456,122

Meetings with consultants following the Mirror Effect process are usually held about one month apart to enable participants to reflect on and discuss the data. In late January a third session was held to review the consultants “Expert Opinion.” Within this meeting is also feedback on the “non dit” or “unspoken” information in which the consultants presented their interpretations of what was implicit in the tone, body language, and themes of the explicit comments made by stakeholders in the previous interviews. Each of the observations by the consultants was slowly read twice for effect and reflection. The reaction was quiet among usually talkative and responsive faculty-- it was as if our secret nonverbal statements had also been heard and now voiced, but they were congruent with our verbal statements and added impact.

The consultants then grouped the feedback under the six categories of dysfunction: work conditions, work organization, communication-cooperation-collaboration, time management, integrated training, and implementation of strategy. Examples of the feedback included (see Table 2): “SB&T does not have a clear focus of its purpose or brand to communicate to the college and to potential students. The process of decision making is not clear, nor are people held accountable if they do not follow policies or procedures that have been decided upon. Adding more and more tasks without taking any away has reduced the ability of SB&T members to devote time to students, teaching, developing themselves and developing their departments.”

Table 2

Examples of Dysfunctions Identified by Faculty and Staff

<p>Work Conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loud classrooms next to offices that interrupt work • High cost, low quality, long lines for lunch room • Outdated college directory; takes time to locate people • Different and conflicting source of student data • Resources scattered and difficult to find; spend time searching or interrupting others • Many glitches in collaborative software used in online teaching <p>Work Organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited office space for storage and work • Too many responsibilities for one Chairperson with multiple undergrad and graduate face-to-face and online programs • Roles not always clear; overlap between roles at different sites can confuse faculty where they can get help • Insufficient autonomy for faculty: takes 30% more time to understand and teach a class that someone else has developed • Work load distribution is unequal: some faculty teach the same course every term, while others teach different ones each term 	<p>Communication-Cooperation-Collaboration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsure where to go for answers to some questions; wasted time searching • People often unavailable; delays in getting back can delay work for hours or days • Interrupting others for help when designated support can't be found • Unresolved tensions were the result of conflict avoidance • There is no agreed upon methods for making decisions across departments; different assumptions about how decisions are made <p>Time Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some faculty do not keep commitments. This causes delays process, time to reschedule, undermines trust • Frequent interruptions disturbs getting work done on time <p>Integrated Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited funds available for training in statistics packages and modeling <p>Implementation of Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of high level strategy • Uncertain alignment of low level School strategy with high level college strategy
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The consultants responded to our apparent despondency by normalizing our data and response: “While it can look overwhelming, your dysfunctions and costs are about the same as those from many other organizations.” The Socio-Economic Institute of Firms and Organizations Research (ISEOR) in Lyon, France has a database of over 3,400 categories of dysfunctions from more than 1200 organizations (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011), and our hidden costs and our responses to them were very similar to most other client organizations. This perspective and subsequent relief enabled us to identify issues with tangible focus for action. We began to label and prioritize issues in metaphorical “baskets” to deal with them more effectively.

Baskets are a way to group similar issues so they can be described, compared, and prioritized. We initially created seven baskets that included branding, strategic planning, decision making processes, academic quality, student support, time management, and professionalism. Faculty decided to form teams to work on the five top issues: branding, which focused on the development and communication of an agreed upon brand for the School; strategic planning, which included both internal and external perspectives; decision making, which involved the development of a clear and agreed upon process for making and communicating decisions; academic quality focused on assessing and addressing the quality of teaching; and professionalism, which included clarifying expectations about roles and professional behavior. The Dean and the faculty reported on the progress made in each basket during a spring retreat.

Retreat results

At the end of the academic year, May of 2016, all full-time and part-time faculty were invited to attend a retreat and review of progress using SEAM. Three areas were assessed by survey: perceptions of the usefulness of the SEAM approach and progress on two of the baskets including strategic planning and professionalism, specifically focused on interpersonal relationships and attitudes toward the work environment. Participants rated degree of agreement on statements using a 1-4 Likert scale ranging from “definitely disagree” to “definitely agree.” The results included:

- Perceptions of the SEAM intervention were positive with 92% of faculty and staff reporting it as being helpful, that they were given the opportunity to participate in the process, and that they support moving forward with SEAM next year. However, only 77% felt that they had personally made a valuable contribution to the process, suggesting that there remained some caution or time restriction on engagement.
- Perceptions on the development of the School’s strategic planning was also positive, with 92% reporting that they understood the strategic priorities and goals, felt committed to achieving the goals, and were hopeful about the future of the School. Again, however, 33% expressed uncertainty about what was expected of them individually.

- The basket of collaboration showed modest attainment compared to ratings on the other baskets. Although 92% agreed that SB&T is a productive and well-functioning school, and 85% said they received support and mentoring from peers, only 77% said that they trusted their peers, and 69% and 62% respectively indicated that they felt safe expressing opinions openly in meetings or were comfortable collaborating with all members of the school.
- The basket regarding work environment contrasted with communication-cooperation-coordination in some ways. About 92% felt that their ideas and contributions were appreciated and that their colleagues respected them, and 85% said they believed their opinions were heard. A full 100% expressed that they were motivated to continuously improve ways to meet student needs and that they enjoy coming to work-- a positive shift in attitude.

Overall, these results show success with the intervention and improvement from the discouragement, despondency, and occasional conflict that had been experienced during previous years among faculty, staff and leadership. There was clear commitment to the educational enterprise and students, renewed hope in the goals and strategies they had helped shape, and confidence in the SEAM process. Yet, there is still work to be done over time in obtaining more engagement of some members, developing greater trust and respect, and building collaboration. Meanwhile, as the SEAM intervention continues, there are ongoing opportunities for these changes to occur. The specific nature of the ongoing work is outlined in the next section.

Current and Ongoing Work

Faculty have continued to participate in project groups designed to address the issues in five of the seven baskets: branding, strategic planning, decision making processes, academic quality, and professionalism. With regard to branding, the project group has drafted, discussed and agreed on new mission and vision statements as well as a brand promise for the School after gathering information from several stakeholders. This group will also transition into working on the development of the internal-external strategic planning project, although all full-time faculty and staff will have opportunities to contribute during the planning process. One success that has already been realized in our development of the strategic plan is the School has already adopted a strategic roadmap that will focus our future work. Another group of faculty drafted a School-wide decision making process that was reviewed and approved by all members of the School in Spring 2016. In Fall 2016, we were successful in applying the approved decision making process to the consideration of a School-wide student internship initiative.

Also beginning in the spring of 2016, a third working group focused on enhancing professionalism within the school began their work by reviewing and affirming a code of conduct the faculty and staff had developed three years earlier. The priorities of this group with

regard to the results of the SEAM intervention included conflict resolution, collaborating with peers, and conducting effective meetings. With much of this group's work being put on hold over the summer (as most full-time faculty are on nine-month contracts), the plan was to create specific solutions and processes regarding the three areas of emphasis in the fall of 2016. However, observations of collaborative and respectful behavior as well as a feeling of a more conducive work environment have suggested that professionalism throughout the school may have been enhanced indirectly through some of the other work that has taken place as a result of the SEAM process and results. Members of the school have agreed to continue to monitor the work environment with regard to professionalism while opting not to develop additional policies or processes to guide behavior at this time.

The work group created to address academic quality began meeting together during the Fall of 2016. Their priority was to research and develop a plan for maintaining and improving academic quality for all of the programs within the school. However, this group is still in the beginning stages of defining quality and considering where to focus their efforts.

Ongoing monthly assistance from the SEAM consultants have encouraged continual progress in the work on baskets and specific projects. The consultants have also continued to challenge and hold the School leadership accountable for progress toward the elimination of the dysfunctions and associated hidden costs.

Conclusion

The SEAM intervention has provided a perspective and tools that previous OD efforts had not utilized. The focus on hidden costs and their related dysfunctions was effective in gaining the attention of participants and unfreezing them from some demoralization and inaction. Identification of baskets enabled participants to focus and prioritize change efforts on meaningful issues, and their roles shifted from being respondents to actors in the change process. In a retreat and subsequent survey of participants, our efforts in implementing SEAM have been viewed as positive and the outcomes as successful. We are continuing our efforts on all baskets for the upcoming year.

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